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An East African Elephant Hunt—R. E. McConnell



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## AN EAST AFRICAN ELEPHANT HUNT

**S**TORIES of the chase of the elephant are commonplace enough. It is not often that a Canadian has the opportunity of following it, however; so perhaps this, and the fact that the particular hunt it is proposed to describe did not result in a kill, will lend a touch of originality sufficient to justify its description.

Having completed a ten months tour in the hot and unhealthy, but splendidly interesting, Nile Province of the Uganda Protectorate, I was ordered to report at the capital, Entebbè, on Lake Victoria—or Victoria Nyanza.

About two hundred miles of this journey were to be accomplished by water and, roughly speaking, two hundred by marching. Capt. "C.," of the K.A.R. (since killed in this war), was returning at the same time, so we decided to remain together throughout the journey and seize every opportunity to get in touch with some shooting.

From Nimule to the north end of Lake Albert we each had a steel boat in which were our belongings, servants, and a quota of sailors. These and two others filled with natives were towed by a launch. Five days of this brought us to the Victoria Nile.

The population along the banks had been removed by the Government on account of endemic sleeping sickness, and here was an opportunity to see if any had returned; so I decided to examine it as far up as the Murchison Falls.

Having reduced equipment to a minimum and taken "C." on board my boat, we cast loose. Three days rowing took us to the falls, whence we returned to Lake Albert and in five days reached the Marine Station Butaiba. We took a day to arrange for porters there. Three days march landed us in Masindi, the journey being varied by the long climb of the escarpment east of the lake and the traversing of the



wit more closely allied with madness. If he must be judged by his actual achievement, his place will not be lofty among the poets of England. But to those who are sensitive to the delicate charm of his strange, wild fancy, there will always hover about his verse the shadowy suggestion of what he "ought to have been." To his honour we recall that he never paltered with the lofty ideal of his art, which as a mere boy he had set before himself. If he buried his talent in a napkin, at least he never was guilty of letting it out to the money-changers. His aim was high, though his hand may have lacked the nerve to speed the arrow to the mark. Men of lesser ability, undazzled by the vision of beauty that distracted him, and untroubled by the hesitation and self-distrust that were his bane, have brought far more to pass; but who shall judge between the merits of their facile successes and the tragic failure of this life-long defeat? Morbid, and half-crazed as he was, we can yet think of Beddoes in the familiar words of Milton's mighty prose as "A poet soaring in the high region of his fancies, with his garland and singing robes about him."

ELIZA RITCHIE



Budonga Forest. At Masindi we changed porters and two more marches brought us to the Kafu River.

During all this journey we had many hunts at our various camping places and our bag included Bush Buck, Reed Buck, Water Buck, Cob, Hippopotamus, and Crocodile. I think hippopotami and crocodiles are more numerous in the Victoria Nile between the Murchison Falls and its entrance into Lake Albert than anywhere else in the world. We had also been on fresh lion and elephant tracks, and had heard their roarings and trumpeting but had not had time to follow them up.

As it was near the Kafu River that we encountered elephants, I will now extract from my diary.

"Dec. 3rd. We decided to make only a short march. A mile took us to the Kafu River, and about two and one half miles south of it we made camp. On the way I digressed to stalk a herd of about twenty male Cobus, but did not get one. While engaged in this, several Reed Buck and Oribi were sighted. Near the river it is quite open country, but we are camped just beyond where open bush scrub starts. We needed meat for our Safari (125 souls), so "C." and I set out in different directions to fill this want. I only saw four Reed Buck, one of which I got, while "C." bagged a Cobus and two Oribi.

"In the afternoon the local chief brought news that about four miles further on there was a herd of elephants which had been in this neighbourhood for some time and was continually devastating the shambas (gardens). We will follow them up to-morrow and hope for some luck. It has been warmer to-day, but after my long sojourn in the hot Nile country I enjoyed the recent coolness. It is a beautiful Sunday night, nearly full moon and clear as crystal.

"Dec. 4th. It is only 10.30 a.m. yet the day has been eventful. We arose at 5.30 a.m. and sent the boats off, "C." and I leaving at 6.15 a.m. Not far along we met the chief, who told us that the elephants were near, and shortly afterwards—having covered only about two miles—we found break-



fast ready and laid out by the road-side. We 'fell to' seriously, not knowing when we would get any more food. We could see a banana shamba about a quarter of a mile to the east of the river, and they said the herd was in or near it. We then saw to our rifles and ammunition. "C." had a double-barreled .400 and a .275 which his orderly carried. His other orderly had my .256 Männlicher. I had also a bearer with a single-barreled .500 and my cook Ferraji, with a double-barreled .450, my favourite rifle. My plan was to take the first shot with the .500 and then quickly transfer it to the cook who carried the ammunition for it, and take from him the .450 of which I had the ammunition. I would thus have three shots within a few seconds with plenty in reserve, while in case of need the cook could pump in the .500.

"The shooting of females is prohibited, but in view of the fact that they were destroying a shamba at the moment we had an excuse to do so if necessary, though we wished to avoid this if possible. It was known that the herd consisted mainly of females, but natives reported some good males.

"We had two trackers, the chief, two orderlies, my cook and gun-bearer, another porter and our two selves in our little army, so that given anything like good ground we should have a kill. My hunting has usually been done alone, so that to-day one felt there was a large element of safety in the number of guns and even in the number of our party, as in the event of a charge the elephants might only follow one or two.

"We then sallied forth, the trackers naturally in the lead. We passed the shamba and soon heard trumpeting ahead. The beasts were moving on slowly, so that it was some time before we got near them. The whole country was intersected with their tracks and many of the trees were freshly broken. Soon we heard the crushing of branches, the rumblings of their bellies, and further trumpeting. We threaded our way nearer with every sense in a high pitch of alertness. Then came a sign from a tracker that he could see them.



"There was scarcely any wind, and what little there was came in gentle puffs from various directions. Stealthily we went on. Soon about sixty yards away we could distinguish several in and behind a clump of high bush. Inspection for a short period led to the conclusion that they were all females. This was on native evidence, for I confess I had not seen any tusks distinctly, and these are the rough criterion on which decision as to sex usually rests in hunting. Those of the female are thinner and straighter, and are also of a finer texture, and bring a higher price. Presently they got our scent and rushed off. I felt rather panicky for a moment, but they did not come in our direction. Fortunately their sight is not as good as their scenting powers. We then made a *détour*, and waited for a time in the hope that a more favourable wind would arise by which we could track with a little more safety. The grass had hitherto been reasonably short. Our trackers had gone on. Again came trumpetings and the crushing of branches from several directions. In order to place them more accurately I climbed a tree, but could only distinguish one in the bush about three-hundred yards from us. During this halt we became quite brave again and many light sallies in conversation were indulged in. Soon the trackers returned and a light breeze having sprung up we again took up the trail. We soon realized that we were near them and a little later saw several. As far as we could make out they were all females. Before we could satisfy ourselves on this point thoroughly, a crashing noise was heard in our right rear. The elephants we had been watching became disturbed, and one came for us with ears out; there was a lot of noise and all our party ran. I hesitated to do so, thinking I could preserve my self-respect better by sheltering behind a high ant-heap; but my cook, on whose judgement I relied, forbade it peremptorily, so we too fled along a different track from the others. After a dash of about two-hundred yards we realized that the elephants had gone off to one side, so cut across through the long grass and joined the others. Only then did I realize that all the fuss had been caused by a second herd coming up on our right rear and



charging in our direction. We had been in grass six to eight feet high which made running difficult. This grass kept with us for the rest of the hunt.

"After a hasty discussion of the situation we made another advance, keeping to the right of the herd. We soon came on them again, and again they were among clumps of large bush surrounded by long grass. We spotted several. It took some time to decide that they were all females. I personally only saw the tusks of one. We then advanced stealthily to the shelter of a bush about twenty-five yards from them, and more or less satisfied ourselves that it was a female herd. This was difficult to establish, and took some time, as their tusks hung low and were only seen when they moved. There were probably thirty or forty of them, perhaps more. We withdrew a little and had just decided to leave them and trace some others when they realized our hostile presence. Trumpeting began and a rushing. We all fled hastily. I became aware that some animal was pursuing me, and was on the point of throwing myself flat in the grass to one side when I summoned up enough courage to look behind and found it was only my cook protecting my rear! Our speed was limited inasmuch as we had to follow irregular tracks where the grass had been trampled down by elephants. Nevertheless we stuck to it grimly and presently came on Captain "C.," thoroughly blown. He had only time to announce that the rush was over when a tremendous angry trumpeting burst forth not far behind us, whereupon our retreat was resumed. These terrible trumpetings of rage when animals are on one's trail would inspire most men with fear, and my respect for renowned hunters mounted considerably. I ran until nearly breathless, two 'boys' with me. I still had the .500 rifle but discovered that the cook was nowhere to be seen and he had the cartridges. We had no idea where all the others were. Then another terrifying scream sent us off again. We made excellent speed until nature indicated that a short rest was necessary. Nothing disturbed us here, so in a more leisurely and dignified manner we set out for a place of greater safety. We had



always to keep in mind the possibility of running into another herd. We soon heard rally calls from the others and presently "C." came up. He had been somewhere behind and to the right of me, and had slacked off somewhat latterly. Our experiences were hastily recounted, and then we had the men with us shout for the other followers. In a short time they rounded up all but the chief who joined us later on the road. I had expected some casualties, but luck had been with us. It had now to be decided whether we would resume the chase. "C." felt it would be unwise although he would do so if I wanted to. I felt it would be most unwise and the orderlies and others agreed with this; unwise for the following reasons: they were certainly almost all females, some with young. The grass was too high to examine them well, and they were both alert and savage. Captain "C." told me later that he knew them for about the fiercest herd in the country, but had thought it wise not to state this earlier. He has had considerable elephant experience and had once before been charged, though in the safer short grass country. He considered this his most exciting hunt, though it was a bloodless battle. We therefore cut across to the main road and soon got back to camp and the comfort of a long chair and a cool drink. If it had not been for our decision not to shoot a female we could at any of the three places where the herds were encountered have shot one, and the chances were that the others would have run up wind and away from us. It is the delay of examining them in unfavourable country which largely makes the danger."

Though I had not had a wide experience of elephants before this, I had shot two without any difficulty, but in many subsequent hunts I never thoroughly shook off this experience.

Since this was written, the Uganda game law has changed and the restrictions on females are not absolute.

Elephants still exist in very large numbers throughout the Protectorate, and are very well protected. They seriously ravage native plantations in many districts, and it is permitted to kill one under these circumstances. It is regrettable that the most common reason for doing so, however, is a pecuniary



one, for the tusks bring Rs. 7.50 to Rs. 15.00 a pound and often run over one-hundred pounds each, though that is a very good size.

After the first feeling of elation at effecting a kill, one feels oneself to be a sorry vandal at having taken a hand in depleting so noble a species—one of the few giants of the prehistoric age which have survived to our time.

R. E. McCONNELL







